

*Anti-Welfarism and The
Making of the 'Problem' Community*

Gerry Mooney

Faculty of Social Sciences

The Open University

Prepared for:

Akwugo Emejulu and Mae Shaw (eds)

*The Glasgow Papers: Critical Perspectives on
Community Development*

February 2010

Gerry Mooney is Senior Lecturer in Social Policy and Criminology, Faculty of Social Sciences, The Open University in Scotland. He is co-editor with Sarah Neal of *Community: Welfare: Crime and Society* (Open University Press, 2009), co-author with Jason Annetts, Wallace McNeish of *Understanding Social Welfare Movements* (Policy Press, 2009) and co-editor with Hazel Croall and Mary Munro of *Criminal Justice in Contemporary Scotland* (Willan Publishing, forthcoming 2010)

G.C.Mooney@open.ac.uk

Introduction: Rediscovering Community – Once Again!

What is it about 'community' that enables it to be mobilised repeatedly as a policy making narrative across different generations? Like a bad penny, 'it' keeps coming back! Certainly it is a resilient notion; the flexibility and plasticity

of the notion of community is apparent to all of us who are interested in 'community development' and in the many different ways in which communities today are being affected by long term economic and social change. The term community can be 'stretched' in a multitude of different ways to refer to very different sets and networks of social relations from describing a local area, networks of interconnections which may or may not be geographically close and of course it can be used as a political and policy making tool – as well as a tool of opposition, of resistance and of struggle.

Many of the readers of this collection of essays will be only too familiar with some of the myriad of (sometimes competing and conflicting) ways in which the notion of community is mobilised in policy making discourse, with community development being one, but only one, obvious reflection of such. Across Scotland and the other parts of the devolved UK today, 'community' as a policy making device is mobilised in many different ways: Community Cohesion, Community Safety and Crime Prevention, Sustainable Communities, Gated Communities..! In addition community appears in a diverse range of other policy making sites and is implicit within other narratives which are, like community, themselves also the source of ambiguity, for instance social capital. The contested and fought over nature of community is illustrated, for example, by the hugely controversial policy pursued by the UK New Labour Government and the Scottish Government between 1999 and 2007 of housing stock transfer, seen by its opponents as little more than the wholesale privatisation of council housing. In the Scottish context, housing stock transfer was advanced as an exercise in 'community ownership', which for many critics was what council housing had long represented.

These are but a few examples. There are of course countless others, drawn from across Scotland, the UK and globally. The notion of community travels far and wide but its potency in the UK context it arguably unrivalled. What emerges from these brief examples is that community is seen as a solution to perceived social problems. However, importantly, it can also be seen as a source of such problems.

The Return of the 'Problem' Community

The idea of a 'problem' community has a history which is as long as with the notion of community itself. While community is generally invoked as something that is a social good, something positive and desired, this co-exists alongside other ways of thinking that locate social problems as a result of community failure, community breakdown or simply a 'lack' of community. In the context of the contemporary UK, for instance, declining community 'cohesion' is seen by the Westminster government as a particular issue on the back of rising immigration and a widening anti-Muslim racism. Questions of race have often played a central role in narratives of community problems in the UK since 1945. However, there are long entanglements between ideas of community and policy making and elite concerns with poor and disadvantaged social groups and it is to this that we turn now.

While the nature, extent and intensity of such discourses and representations vary considerably over time and place, we do not have to look far to find claims that 'the poor' (here used as a generic category) represent a 'danger' not only to themselves, but also to 'wider' society. In the UK over the past century and a half, for example, when poverty and inequality has increased, as since the late 1970s and early 1980s this has generally been accompanied by attempts to construct 'the problem' not as one of poverty but of poor people, their behaviours, lifestyles, cultures and inadequacies of a multitude of differing kinds. Notions of 'the poor' immediately serve to construct and delineate a particular group in the population, 'them' not 'us'!

Seeing the poor and disadvantaged as 'at risk' or as a 'vulnerable' section of society requiring state support or 'social security' stands in sharp contrast to those representations of the poor as an 'underclass' or an 'undeserving' group that require management and control. Further, constructions of the disadvantaged as a 'problem population' does not occur in a vacuum but mirrors the wider social relations of inequality. The very inequalities that so pervade the world today also underlie many of the dominant representations of those groups most affected by inequality as in some way the product of their behaviour or some other lacking in the way that they organise their personal or family lives. Through this poverty and inequality come to be seen not as a product of state failure, of an inadequate welfare state nor of

'unfairness' or injustice, but variously either as a consequence of a 'lacking' or of 'negative', 'dysfunctional' and 'backward' attitudes.

Through this people and place come to be identified in particularly pejorative ways: particular kinds of people come to be associated with particular kinds of places. The social and the geographical come together in notions such as 'the problem estate' to describe particular places – and also their populations – as being characterised by social problems, or with particular social needs but also as locales of crime and disorder.

These localities are often symbolic, representing all that is problematic about social life. They become catch-words for a diverse assortment of social ills but work also to view such problems as being of particular places and of the people who dwell therein. Impoverished and disadvantaged areas come to be understood as the harbingers of social problems. This is reflected, once more, across a range of urban social policies and regeneration programmes that both speaks of 'poor people and poor places' but also of what they *should be like*.

There have long been many and repeated attempts to associate particular groups of people with particular places, in some ways 'reading' people from where they live. There are many diverse and changing ways in which such constructions have emerged both over time and across different countries, from the fears of politicians and of the rich with the slum-dwellers and crime-ridden 'rookeries' of nineteenth century London, Glasgow, Manchester and other cities through to the activities of market research organisations in the UK today that designate particular places as 'credit-risks'

Today in the UK the council estate plays such a role. Now this is a controversial claim in that for a considerable part of its history, council housing played a key welfare role, meeting the housing needs of a sizeable section of the UK population. In the context of the post 1960s period, however, there has been a steady shift towards understanding council housing, now rebadged as social housing, as welfare housing. The difference being that in the context of welfare state expansion in the immediate post-1945 era, 'welfare' was not portrayed in the negative way that it is today in the context of neoliberalism.

‘Problem’ Communities and the ‘Broken’ Society: Pejorative Entanglements!

In 2006 a research programme concerned to explore public attitudes to poverty and inequality was launched by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. The role of the media, and in particular the news media, occupied an agenda. One of the key findings was that UK poverty was generally a marginal issue for the news media but where poverty was reported, people experiencing poverty were either represented in a stigmatised way or as passive victims. The media play an important role in helping to form and shape public attitudes to poverty, attitudes which appear to be hardening and which often view poverty as a consequence of individual behavioural inadequacies and which tend to show less support for redistribution and more demand for tough measures against ‘benefit cheats’.

The Glasgow East by-election in July 2008 represented a unique case study of the role of the media in helping to generate consent for more punitive government policies in relation to welfare – as well as working to harden attitudes to poverty and welfare. During the by-election campaign Glasgow East, and the citizens who live therein, were generally portrayed in a negative light. The ‘problems’ of Glasgow East were frequently used to support arguments which presented poverty and other social ills alternatively as either a consequence of welfare dependency or individual inadequacies in some form or other. The presentation of ‘Glasgow East’ provided an opportunity for voice to be given once again to other kinds of thinking that have long featured prominently in the reporting of poverty in disadvantaged urban areas across the UK which works to construct particular locales as ‘problem’ places, or as ‘welfare ghettos’.

Media and political commentary work to influence and reinforce each other and this was also clearly evident in Glasgow East and it was a series of well publicised visits to the constituency by two leading Conservative politicians which has helped to shape much of the newspaper media reportage during the election. Iain Duncan Smith had already made well publicised trips to the Glasgow’s east end, launching in February 2008 the Centre for Social Justice report, *‘Breakthrough Glasgow’*. Adopting a language that came to be the

common sense of media reporting, Glasgow East was the example par excellence of the 'broken society'. Picking-up on this the Glasgow East by-election in turn was dubbed the 'broken society' or 'breakdown society' election. Following Smith to Glasgow to launch the Conservative election campaign, Conservative leader David Cameron also invoked Smith's broken society arguments and while wishing to avoid any suggestion that they were responsible for the media reportage of poverty evidence here, nonetheless they were instrumental in portraying the people of Glasgow East in very disparaging terms, albeit as a way of highlighting New Labour's failures. Social welfare is identified as *the* factor generating the kinds of social problems that have now become a staple of political, media and policy making commentary.

As with such earlier anti-welfare narratives such as Charles Murray's identification of a welfare created and a welfare dependent 'underclass', part of the potency and pervasiveness of the Broken Society idea is that it is a very flexible notion, able to be deployed as an explanation of a range of social problems and popular social ills. It also speaks to the anxieties and fears highlighted above. In the hands of the Conservative Party, however, there is a clear argument that the broken society has its roots in 'broken families'. Teenage pregnancies, increasing numbers of one parent households caught, of course, in a 'dependency culture', feature prominently in this account. The institution of the family and approaches to families become a key site for political and policy argument and a target for policy formation. For example, while for the CSJ there are five poverty 'drivers': family breakdown, welfare dependency, educational failure, addiction to drugs and alcohol and serious personal debt, as is clear from the CSJ's report *Every Family Matters* (2009), marriage and a stable two-parent family life are key to mending Broken Britain and thereby reducing levels of poverty.

'Problem Communities' and Anti-Welfarism

Throughout the history of 'problem community' narratives in the UK, from the inter-war period and slum housing through the recurring concerns with 'inner city slums and 'problem estates', ideas of problem communities are entangled with explicit anti-welfare ideologies that draw upon a century and more-old

distinction between, to use the language of the late nineteenth century, 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor, which in the increasingly pervasive language of the early 'noughties' now talks of aspirational deficits, dysfunctional and deviant behaviours, an absence of social capital (at least of social capital of the 'right' kind!) and a seemingly expanding range of moral and behavioural problems which have some of the poorest sections of contemporary UK society trapped in a, now rediscovered, culture of poverty. The well publicised Karen Matthews episode speaks to and reflects such an anti-welfarism. The conviction of Matthews (and that of her partner) for the kidnapping of her nine year old daughter in Dewsbury, West Yorkshire in 2008, provoked a right-wing moral backlash. Speaking shortly after their sentencing in December 2008, Conservative leader David Cameron commented that:

'The verdict last week on Karen Matthews and her vile accomplice is also a verdict on our broken society. The details are damning. A fragmented family held together by drink, drugs and deception. An estate where decency fights a losing battle against degradation and despair. A community whose pillars are crime, unemployment and addiction. How can Gordon Brown argue that people who talk about a broken society are wrong? These children suffered at the very sharpest end of our broken society but all over the country are other young victims, too. Children whose toys are dad's discarded drink bottles; whose role models are criminals, liars and layabouts; whose innocence is lost before their first milk tooth. What chance for these children? Raised without manners, morals or a decent education, they're caught up in the same destructive chain as their parents. It's a chain that links unemployment, family breakdown, debt, drugs and crime.'

(David Cameron, *Daily Mail*, December 8, 2008)

In the Charles Murray-esque 'underclass' landscape conjured up here by Cameron a particular anti-welfare message is being invited. This invitation is that existing forms of welfare provision have not only failed to make any effective interruption in the 'destructive chain' it is, more damningly,

contributive and even causal of it. While Cameron's term the 'broken society' may be new the state of the poor and the responsibility of poor people for the state they exist in is an old and persistent argument that has always been able to find a ready audience in sections of the popular media and among politicians across the political spectrum, and of course among some in policy-making and academic circles.

Notions of problem communities today are tied-up with narratives of welfare failure. That the state is now failing to protect us from a seemingly growing and expanding range of social harms and risks in an increasingly precarious and uncertain time. Anna Minton has talked of Britain as a 'distrustful and fearful society'. This modern 'social evil', she claims, results from growing social and geographical inequalities and from a media which has a vested commercial interest in promoting fear and insecurity. Minton points to the twin processes of deepening social and economic segregation and the homogenisation of communities. The Moorside estate where the Matthews kidnapping took place is not one, but many worlds apart, from the increasingly privatised and segregated enclaves of affluence that exist in parts of urban, suburban and rural Britain.

In conclusion, while the problem communities ideology has long been influenced by a range of different political and policy making concerns, ideas of a welfare dependent, feckless and deviant poor are to the fore along with notions of a dangerous and unruly poor. The problematisation of poor people and poor communities is in this way also shaped by a pathologisation and criminalisation of poverty. In this regard concerns with welfare are entangled with concerns about disorders and deviancy, with in the language favoured by politicians and policy makers today, anti-social behaviour.

While the political positions and the terminology differ around 'broken societies' and 'problem populations', what is broadly shared is an emphasis on individual and family responsibility but, importantly, there is talk too of a need to encourage a revival of community 'spirit', volunteering and mutuality. The deliberations and arguments about the reformations of welfare are not about the ending of welfare or no welfare. Nor are they completely about individualisation. There is a concern with social cohesion and stability. But much of this is located in a responsabilisation and punitive narratives.

Community and Social Welfare in the Years to Come

The demands made on the concept of community are diverse and many. Both New Labour and now the Conservatives make great efforts to valorise community as a way of organising social life. Community has become the modality through which social welfare provision and crime control strategies are to be conceived, designed and delivered. Cameron has spoken of community as a bulwark against 'big state', as way of enabling individual responsabilisation. Community here is regarded as an alternative state intervention. Alongside this there is a retreat to another narrative which has also enjoyed a long and close relationship with community – familialism. New Labour, and Gordon Brown in particular have in recent years made repeated references to the government's desire to support 'hard working families', as opposed, it is supposed, to those 50,00 'chaotic and dysfunctional' families which have been identified by Brown in 2009 as a scourge of modern British society.

In the general election to come in 2010 – and beyond – ideas and notions of community and family will form a key part of the battleground around not only social welfare but will feature prominently in wider political visions. Within such notions of problem communities, even if rarely badged as such, will be an ever present too in such visions. A key task for those community activists to seek to challenge such representations, as well as those who are committed to supporting impoverished communities, is to resist all attempts to 'other' the most disadvantaged in society.